

TEACHER STORIES AND TRANSACTIONAL INQUIRY

HEARING THE VOICES OF MENTOR TEACHERS

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The authors trace their work with mentor teachers in a southwestern U.S. professional development school. These mentors met to tell, write, share, and analyze stories of their experiences as mentors to preservice teachers. As the authors worked with several groups of teachers, they began to analyze the processes involved in the sessions. An outcome of the authors' discussions was the idea of transactional inquiry, a method grounded in narrative inquiry, transactional literacy theory, and literary analysis. Transactional inquiry provides a vehicle for teachers to reflect on their own and others' professional development, identify lessons from their teaching, and connect with other teachers through the inquiry process. This article describes the evolution of transactional inquiry as well as the mentors' stories and sharing.

Professional development schools are designed to engage university and public school partners in a systemic restructuring of preservice teacher preparation that integrates practical experience and theoretical knowledge (Boyer, 1983; Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986; Fullan, 1996; Goodlad, 1987, 1993; Holmes Group, 1986; Levine, 1992; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Wise, Darling-Hammond, Berry, & Klein, 1987; Zeichner, 1992). Experienced public school teachers mentor novice teachers during internships in public school classrooms, collaborating with university liaisons to scaffold preservice teachers' developing competencies. This three-way partnership among preservice teacher, mentor, and university liaison values both the practical and the theoretical as essential elements of teaching success and offers opportunities for all voices to be part of the preservice teacher's growth. Mentors thus have a critical

role in the success of preservice teachers and professional development schools.

Whereas mentors' involvement is central to field-based programs, specific roles and responsibilities are shaped by the goals and structures of the partners in each professional development school, the participating school systems, and the individuals themselves. Mentor teachers' thoughts and experiences undoubtedly influence their practices and may lead them to view themselves as nurturers of preservice teachers (Gold, 1996), facilitators and professional contributors (Little, Gallagaran, & O'Neal, 1994), change agents involved in educational improvement (Bahney, 1995; Bova & Phillips, 1984; Fullan, 1993b; Stevens, 1995), or some combination of all of these. Mentors may also find that their participation in field-based education programs provides them with opportunities to improve the education profession and to continue their own professional develop-

ment (Bahney, 1995; Foote, Walker, Zeek, & Filkins, 1997; Zeek & Meers, 1996).

Field-based teacher education thus has the potential to provide fresh, new contexts for the professional growth of mentor teachers. Too often, however, mentors' ideas are not heard outside their classrooms, and their opportunities for professional growth are limited. The inquiry we describe here grew from our research into ways to recognize and value in genuine ways mentor teachers' voices while also encouraging them to take ownership of their professional growth. The purpose of this article is to discuss the development of *transactional inquiry*, our method of engaging mentors in sharing, responding, and reflecting on their own and others' stories about mentoring. Based on our ongoing research (Fleener, Walker, Foote, & Zeek, 1998; Foote et al., 1997; Foote, Zeek, Walker, & Fleener, 1998; Walker, Foote, Fleener, & Zeek, 1998; Walker, Zeek, Fleener, & Foote, 1997; Zeek & Walker, 1998; Zeek, Walker, & Foote, 1999, 2000; Zeek, Walker, Foote, & Fleener, 1999), we trace the development of transactional inquiry through three stages: beginning, extension, and consolidation. For each stage, we describe context and structure, analyze and reflect on process and products, and build the theoretical framework that supports and extends our thinking. We close with a discussion of the continuing evolution of the method and ongoing directions of our inquiry.

STAGE ONE: BEGINNING

The authors' inquiry began when we sought ways to recognize mentors' professional voices. We were all university liaisons in a professional development school (PDS) whose partners included four school districts near Dallas, Texas. Our initial questions arose from a quantitative study conducted for this PDS that suggested that teachers in this PDS volunteered to be mentors primarily out of concern for the education profession but continued to mentor in large part because the experience benefited their own professional development (Bahney, 1995; Zeek & Meers, 1996).

To inquire about the specific benefits mentors identified, we organized four informal conversations with mentors from grades K-6 in three of the partner districts. Mentors voluntarily attended the conversations, which were scheduled in their buildings after school for about 60 minutes each. Attendance at each conversation ranged from 7 to 12 mentors, with a total of 34 participants across the conversations. Participants' classroom teaching experience ranged from 2 to 20 years, whereas their mentoring experience ranged from one to four semesters, the length of time the PDS had been in operation. We explained to the mentors that we wanted to know more about the benefits they received from mentoring.

The conversations were recorded on audio tape, while one of the researchers typed the dialogue into a computer as a backup to the tape. During these initial conversations, we posed four questions suggested by Stevens (1995): (a) How has your classroom performance changed as a result of the mentoring experience? (b) How have your attitudes toward teaching changed? (c) How have you grown professionally? (d) How have your relationships with your fellow teachers changed?

Analysis and Reflection

We transcribed the audio tapes and computer records of all of the mentor conversations and then read and discussed them with two other university colleagues to identify clusters of similar ideas across the four transcripts. As we reflected on the transcripts, field notes, and idea clusters through conversations with our university colleagues, four critical insights led us to reconsider our research strategies for bringing out mentor voices and documenting their ideas. First, the mentors indicated in their conversations that the process of discussing their mentoring experiences with university and public school colleagues empowered them by valuing their teaching experience and ideas. One exchange is reproduced here.

Mentor 1: It's [mentoring] helped me to know what a mentor is. I didn't really know. I thought it meant just procedures. I wasn't really aware to check on them [preservice teachers]. I didn't want to push my

ideas on them. I wanted them to do their own thing. This has helped me to grow as a leader instead of being a follower and going along with the crowd.

Facilitator: What does that mean?

Mentor 2: My ideas are worthwhile; my ideas are meaningful.

This first insight led directly to the second, that the mentors welcomed the opportunity to express their opinions and share their experiences through talking with other mentors and university liaisons. One mentor exclaimed, "We thought you'd never ask!" The conversations ran beyond their scheduled 60 minutes, lasting up to 90 minutes, and led to similar conversations among mentors within their school days. Our third insight came as we realized that mentors responded to our questions by telling stories to illustrate their points. One mentor, for instance, told the story of how her student teacher had completely rearranged the classroom to accommodate better the integrated unit she planned to teach. Finally, as we constructed themes from the conversations, we recognized that we had only asked and answered *our questions*, although we strive for organic collaboration (Dixon & Ishler, 1992) in our PDS work. The mentors' questions were not yet a part of the inquiry.

Building the Theoretical Framework

As we reflected on the insights we had gained, we looked again at theory and research that could help us move to the next stage of our inquiry. Our analysis of the conversations suggested to us that the conversational structure of these sessions could value and recognize mentors' voices and led us to consider how to (a) focus the talk on mentors' experiences and questions and (b) expand the conversations to include the voices of more mentors. To accomplish those goals, we drew on the concepts of "personal practical knowledge" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) and "professional knowledge landscape" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) as shown in teachers' narratives of practice. These concepts suggest that teachers' classroom practices are influenced by past experiences and future plans and that teacher knowledge is shaped by the contexts in which teachers work.

It seemed reasonable that these ideas and the narrative approach would also apply to mentors' knowledge. In their conversations, the mentors told stories that demonstrated their personal practical knowledge and hinted at their professional knowledge landscapes. They also responded to the stories other mentors told. Fullan (1994) suggested that a critical element of redefining teaching is teachers' knowledge of the change process, which involves both restructuring schools and reculturing the people in them. Although the mentors did not specifically refer to either restructuring or reculturing, their stories reflected personal change. We therefore selected the narrative inquiry method (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) as the framework for the second stage of our inquiry to allow mentors to tell their own stories, identify the lessons embedded in them, and then share the stories with other groups of mentors.

Narrative inquiry encourages reflective practice (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990); captures the complex, nonlinear nature of developing practices and beliefs (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 1999; Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995); makes visible teachers' thought processes (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995; Richardson, 1994); and focuses on developing beliefs and practices (Connelly & Clandinin, 1985, 1990, 1995; Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995; Meyer, 1996; Stansell, 1993). By focusing on teachers' stories and the lessons embedded in them, we hoped to integrate the goals of formal research, intended to increase the knowledge base of the profession as a whole and the goals of practical inquiry, intended to improve local classroom practice (Richardson, 1994). We expected that this integration would help mentors identify pivotal experiences in their own professional growth and provide connections with other mentors through the analysis process.

Hearing the stories of teachers at many levels of expertise in different situations can provide insight into the events that form their professional knowledge. Reflecting collaboratively on the stories and their lessons can provide understanding of how teachers make sense of their experiences and incorporate them into their

personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 1999; Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995; Richardson, 1994). Sharing stories and lessons among teachers can further build a sense of community, reduce the isolation so endemic to teaching, and encourage teachers to see themselves as intentional practitioners integrating skill and art into their practice. All of these factors can combine to help teachers recognize and facilitate the process of change in their professional lives.

STAGE TWO: EXTENSION

In Stage 1, the beginning stage of our inquiry, we used a conversational structure that brought out mentors' voices in their buildings and districts. In Stage 2, the extension stage, our exploration of narrative inquiry led us to use narrative to capture mentors' experiences and share them with mentors in other buildings and districts. Jalongo and Isenberg (1995, p. xxi) maintained that the narrative mode provides an unequalled avenue for exploring the complexities of what it means to teach because "it is in the narrative mode that teachers consider daily dilemmas, examine their motives and misgivings, savor their successes, and anguish over their failures." Therefore, we focused on developing and analyzing stories to further extend mentors' voices.

The second stage of our inquiry was designed to explore the question of how telling and analyzing narratives can promote mentors' reflection on pivotal mentoring events. It initially involved 15 mentors from grades K-6 in three schools from two of the original partner districts as well as the student teachers and university liaisons who work with them. At weekly meetings and mid-term and end-of-semester portfolio conferences, participants on each campus assess the progress of individual preservice teachers and raise relevant program issues. Mentors' voices are a critical component of these conferences; thus, the forum and format for conversations among mentors about their mentoring experiences were already in place.

Data collection and analysis began when these 15 mentors shared their stories of pivotal events in their experience as mentors to

preservice teachers. The prompt, "Tell me about an interesting thing that your intern or resident [first- or second-semester student teacher] did that turned out better than you thought it would," evolved during portfolio conferences to assess preservice teachers' growth. These stories were transcribed by preservice teachers or liaisons and edited by the mentors. Mentors gave pseudonyms to themselves and the student teachers to protect their anonymity when their stories were shared with others. Research questions and data collection are described above; analysis is described in the next section.

Analysis and Reflection

The initial round of edited stories was analyzed collaboratively across sites during professional development sessions for mentors. The sessions were designed to encourage conversations among mentors about pivotal events in their experiences. (This analysis is described more fully in Walker et al. [1998].) Mentors in three districts—the two in which the stories were written and one other—met in small groups to read the stories and respond to three prompts: (a) Give the story a descriptive or provocative title. (b) What is the moral of the story? (c) What message does this story have for you as an experienced mentor? These groups of mentors then shared "an interesting thing that my intern or resident did that turned out better than I thought it would." The titles, morals, and messages were read and discussed by mixed groups of mentors, liaisons, and preservice teachers, suggesting five themes.

1. *Student teachers tend to use less cautious approaches than their mentor teachers.* In one story, a student teacher brought "gobs of rice (about 50 pounds)" to teach a first-grade lesson on measurement. Although the mentor "thought it would be a complete disaster . . . the lesson went better than I expected, and the students really learned volume measurement. I gave him great credit for taking a risk I have not yet taken on my own." In another story, a student teacher videotaped a newscast of sixth graders' research findings on explorers. The mentor described how "they created a backdrop, went out in full cos-

tume, and had their own little skits . . . it was a real good lesson.”

2. *The wise mentor graciously supports the student teacher while she or he learns to teach.* One mentor said, “I began raising my hand to ask questions or add information [instead of watching my student teacher drown during a particularly difficult moment in a lesson] because of my belief that we are all a team.” During analysis, this story was given the title *The Drowning Lesson*.

3. *Drowning can be a graceful choice.* In other situations, however, mentors chose not to intervene: “As the lesson was dying, I let it play out and then discussed with my [student teacher] how it could have been improved.” Another mentor described the confusion that group work set off:

It was suddenly bedlam in the room . . . and she didn't do anything until it was too late. . . . After the lesson she cried. I told her I had decided to see what she would do, and she realized she needed to do more—a whole lot earlier—before the kids became the ones in charge. After that she began using management skills better, and I saw a more confident teacher.

4. *Teamwork leads to success.* Mentors analyzing *The Drowning Lesson* proposed this moral and added their own stories of teamwork. One mentor summed up her mentoring reminiscences by saying, “[My student teacher] was very much a team player. It's neat when they can just jump in and work like we do.” Another mentor joyfully wrote, “We began to use every teachable moment to the fullest . . . every spare moment to finish a job. . . . We learned to problem solve together and be oh so flexible. It was an awesome experience for both of us.”

5. *Partnering happens.* Several mentors recalled arriving late to class to find their partner teaching. For example, “[After a ‘bumpy’ morning] I arrived to find the day had started as normal. All the children were on task with their morning routine, and [the student teacher] was calm and in total control. . . . We had a partnership . . . I should have known what I would find.” Other stories involved exchanges of in-

formation and materials between expert and novice, who had become colleagues. One example, from the story *Communication Is a Two Way Street*, describes the bonds that form between veteran and novice teachers from different cultural backgrounds: “The children loved [the student teacher's] lesson about Kwaanza. I was impressed and educated as well. In fact, later I borrowed her artifacts and still use them today.”

We found again that the participants eagerly shared their stories, thoughtfully reflected on their content, and anticipated the next opportunity to share. The structure of narrative inquiry made mentors' voices both the subject and the mode of inquiry, accomplishing our goals of capturing mentors' experiences and sharing them with a broader audience. Our conversations with the participants and among ourselves led us to our next critical insights. First, the overall purpose of relating mentoring practices called for a focus on relating events to a wider audience, whereas questions about title, moral, and message called for a literary point of view. This combination balanced the efferent and aesthetic stances in the participants' responses (Rosenblatt, 1978). Second, we saw the teachers engaged in transactions (Rosenblatt, 1978) among the written texts, their own experiences, and each other through their discussions. It was at this point that we began to develop the concept of transactional inquiry.

Building the Theoretical Framework

Transactional inquiry is the term we chose to describe the process of a group of educators responding to and reflecting on a text as well as the responses of others to the text for the purpose of informing and guiding further inquiry. The texts we have used focus on critical experiences in mentors' professional development and are based on their work in this established PDS. The transactional inquiry approach has roots and analogues in several broad philosophical and theoretical fields: the transactional process (Dewey & Bentley, 1949); the transactional theory of literacy, or reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978, 1994); the social construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1986); and

the thesis that human beings perceive the world narratively (Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995).

Dewey and Bentley (1949) suggested that the term *interaction* implies separate entities acting on one another but not being changed by the interaction. In a *transaction*, on the other hand, the elements are part of an ongoing process, with each conditioned by and conditioning the other. Rosenblatt (1978) extended the concept of transaction to the literacy process and focused on the transaction occurring between the reader and the text. Readers actively construct meaning, respond to a text, and reflect on their responses, all within a specific context. The meaning of a text is not found in the printed words but is constructed by each reader through a unique transaction. Rosenblatt further suggested that a reader approaches a text from a stance that lies along a continuum from efferent to aesthetic. Efferent reading focuses on the public aspects of meaning, preparing the reader to recall information found in the reading for such purposes as group discussions, test taking, or formal debates. Aesthetic reading focuses on the private aspects of meaning, emphasizing the reader's personal experiences and responses. Blending aesthetic and efferent stances in literary analysis has been found to result in a high level of complex response strategies (Many, Gerla, & Ellis, 1995) as well as promoting critical thinking skills (Esplugas & Landwehr, 1996) and reflection (Kramp & Humphreys, 1993).

Vygotsky's (1986) premise that knowledge is constructed through social interaction and dialogue with others further supports using stories to examine the nature of learning and to prompt further inquiries. As teachers reason and reflect on their own stories and the stories of others, they carefully consider the success or lack of success in each. This process leads to new and deeper insights that they could not have gained through private reflection alone and encourages participants to reflect on complex events (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995).

In transactional inquiry, responses and reflections are guided by prompts, such as those used in our extension stage, which encourage a bal-

ance between aesthetic and efferent stances: Mentors respond to the situation that prompted the story, discuss its literary aspects, and apply its lessons to their individual situations. Throughout the process, they engage in a transaction among the story, their own experiences, and the social context in which they encounter the story. As a method of research, transactional inquiry invites all participants to explore their questions and to collaboratively design activities to suggest possible answers. In our situation, because we work in several school districts, this method allows a wide variety of mentors to participate in telling, analyzing, and interpreting stories in multiple contexts and from multiple perspectives. This social constructivist process also contributes to triangulation of results and member checking, validating the groups' conclusions.

In developing the concept of transactional inquiry, we emphasized the value of approaching a text from both efferent and aesthetic stances to promote schema elaboration and application as well as to evoke personal responses. We also stressed the transactional nature of mentors' reflections; that is, each group of mentors engaged in a transaction with the text, their own prior experiences and knowledge, and the group context. Because the process is a social one, mentors also interacted with each other to construct understanding of the stories and of the concept of mentoring.

STAGE THREE: CONSOLIDATION

Revisiting the stories and conversations from Stage 2 suggested to us that the process of transactional inquiry was simultaneously provoking cognitive dissonance and creating "aha" moments of insight as mentors realized that many of their own experiences, concerns, and questions about mentoring were evident in other mentors' stories. As a result of what we learned in Stage 2 of our inquiry, our research question in Stage 3 focused on how transactional inquiry could facilitate professional growth among mentors in multiple PDS sites.

We invited 24 mentors from grades K-6 in two of the partner districts to participate in 1½- to 2-hour sessions rather than the earlier 45- to 60-

minute formats to allow for more group time. Each mentor selected a title for a made-for-TV movie about her or his life as a mentor teacher, shared titles with a partner, and suggested a title for a movie sequel. Small groups of mentors then read and analyzed stories written at other sites, suggesting title, moral, and elements that make it a good story. The message prompt we used in Stage 2 was expanded to encourage the groups to discuss what the story told them about teaching, learning, and mentoring. The groups recorded their responses on chart paper and responded to each of the charts in a gallery walk. Individual mentors then wrote their own mentoring stories with the title *The Day I Turned the Corner and Became a Mentor*. The sessions concluded with a whole-group discussion in which insights and questions were shared in the form of "pluses and wishes."

Analysis and Reflection

Our analysis of these stories continues in conversations with each other, mentor teachers, and university colleagues, suggesting some intriguing directions. First, there is an element of intertextuality not present in earlier stories and analyses. For instance, one mentor compares her experience to what she calls "the rice story," in which a student teacher brought "gobs of rice" for a measurement lesson. Second, the initial themes are being repeated in these stories, validating the original analysis. We see frequent examples of partnership, trust, and risk taking. One mentor tells the story of "breaking the rules" to help her student teacher set an appropriate atmosphere for a Readers Theater by "[lighting] a candle for ambiance." Another describes her student teacher's successful idea for helping a disruptive child manage his behavior by using "a clip board, a piece of paper and pencil . . . for the child to tell every time he was able to raise his hand and not call out during class time." Still another mentor tells of her student teacher's determination to use Play-Doh in a map-making lesson. We also see examples of *The Drowning Lesson* as student teachers struggle with classroom management and inappropriate book selections. Third, in these new stories, we see the mentors recalling their own

experiences as students or new teachers and using these recollections to guide them as mentors. One tells of feeling "unsupported, lost, and heartsick" at her cooperating teacher's suggestion that "I might want to consider another profession" and her resulting determination to support the student teachers she now mentors. Finally, the mentors' stories reflect a wide variety of literary styles. Some are informative: "I've learned things from each of my interns . . . new activities to use in the classroom . . . a new [adult] perspective on a student." A few stories are fluently narrative:

It was Tuesday, I think, when Willis turned in a rough, rough draft of the first part of his autobiography. Bless his heart, we had brought him over to our side. . . . Much to his surprise I saved his work and [later] printed it out for his mother. She remembered he had asked a bunch of questions about himself as a baby, but she didn't have time to sit down and talk. That explained why he didn't start on time.

This range of styles is in line with Rosenblatt's (1994) suggestion that writers as well as readers take predominantly efferent or aesthetic stances.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We began our inquiry by seeking ways for university-based teacher educators truly to hear mentor teachers' voices. Our findings suggest that mentors' narratives can point to events that are critical in mentors' professional development and that transactional inquiry provides a structure for discussions across school sites. As the concept of transactional inquiry develops, we keep the mentors' ideas and feedback clearly in mind. In their evaluations, we see evidence of respect for the process and the profession:

"Interesting way of thinking of our experiences (as movie titles, songs, etc.)." "I enjoyed the chance to write; I love to write!" "I liked the imaginative way we were able to tell our own mentoring stories." "This session was very enlightening and very relaxing." "[It] was not a lecture!" "Interactive!!!" "Inspirational stories help remind us why we chose this profession."

As we continue our work with mentors through transactional inquiry, we keep their hard questions visible: "Could we have more

time to reflect?" "Could we get to know other mentors from the other [district] schools . . . maybe have a network of mentors and [student teachers]?" "Would it be possible to have less 'activities' [and more] open discussion between groups about what worked, what didn't?" "Could we take time to share our own stories?" "Could we have more information on the [field-based teacher education] program?" "Could we have more strategies to use with [student teachers]?" "Can I be sure I am providing everything for my mentee that she needs to be a successful teacher?"

Our use of narrative and our development of transactional inquiry focuses on teachers' answers to the complex issues surrounding teaching, learning, and professional development. Too often, we hear only the voices of others—administrators, legislators, and others far removed from the realities of the classroom—who seek to explain education in terms of numbers, statistics, or linear processes designed to yield specific results. The narrative mode adds the voices of teachers and the faces of learners, empowering them as advocates for education. As teachers tell their stories, we hear the authority and perspective that comes from time spent with learners. As teachers respond to and analyze stories, we hear the voices of reflective practitioners interactively examining their beliefs and practices.

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